The relationship between attitude and language proficiency

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ABSTRACT

The present study aims to investigate whether upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners can benefit from developing positive attitude toward learning English as an EFL. 32 female language learners from Shokoh-e-Andisheh language institute in Babolsar, were chosen as the participants of the study. The results of the study indicated that there is a significant relationship between language attitude and success in language learning of upper intermediate Iranian EFL learners.

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Introduction

Language attitudes are the feelings people have about their own language or the languages of others (Crystal, 1992).Richards, Platt and Platt (1992, p. 199) define attitude as

The attitude which speakers of different languages or language varieties have towards each others' languages or to their own language. Expressions of positive or negative feelings towards a language may reflect impressions of linguistic difficulty or simplicity, ease or difficulty of learning, degree of importance, elegance, social status, etc. Attitudes towards a language may also show what people feel about the speakers of that language.

Attitude carries cognitive and affective components; it involves beliefs, emotional reactions and behavioral tendencies related to the object of the attitudes (McGroarty, 1996, as cited in Ghazali, 2008). It has an evaluative aspect, a disposition and tendency to react positively or negatively to something. In a nutshell, it is, theway someone thinks or behaves. However, attitudes are not static and can be changed by identifying the sources of negative attitudes and correcting them (Ghazali, 2008).The significance of the role that attitudes play in language education planning and development has been noted by many researchers (Mparusta, et al., 1990). Students' attitudes towards the target language, its speakers and the learning context mayall play some part in explaining their success in learning a language (Candlin& Mercer, 2001, as cited in Ghazali, 2008).

Numerous research studies have been conducted on the role of attitude in second language acquisition, probably spurred by the knowledge that negative attitudes can change (Ghazali, 2008). Factors like better teaching strategies, classroom and social environment can drastically reduce negative attitudes (Choy, 2002, as cited in Ghazali, 2008). Individual differences also play a significant role in learning a language. In second language learning contexts, factors like age, gender, language background, type of school attended, and peer influences are some of the variables that influence language acquisition and attitudes (Merisou-Strom, 2007, as cited in Ghazali, 2008).

Attitudes are often shaped by the social context, "develop early in childhood and are the result of parents and peers'

attitudes" (Brown, 2000 p.180) as well as contact with others from different cultures. Attitudes towards a language, suchas whether a language is considered worth learning, often begin at home. Social context also determines provision and practice for second language learning at home. Families that have positive attitudes towards English for example, might provide reading materials and practice in an informal learning context.

Students with positive attitudes will spend more effort to learn the language by using strategies such as asking questions, volunteering information and answering questions (Baker, 1993). Attitudes therefore affect the rate of development and the final proficiency achieved in the target language. Fortunately, attitudes do not remain static; they can be changed through the learning process such as by using appropriate materials and teaching techniques. Attitudes also improve because of language learning, as learners who learn well will acquire positive attitudes.

Ellis (1994) finds that female students have better attitudes towards second language acquisition compared to male students. Female students are found to allocate more time and money in purchasing and getting access to reading materials in English.

There have been numerous studies of the relation between attitudes and achievement in language learning (Rigan, 2008).The basic premise underlying attitudinal research in second language acquisition studies is that language is a major defining attribute of a group of people, and, thus, to learn a language involves some degree of identification with the group that speaks it. In other words, language is more than a symbolic system that facilitates communication. Language is a defining behavioral feature of a cultural group, and thus acquiring the language involves taking on patterns of behavior of that group. Consequently, an individual's attitudes toward that group and toward other cultural groups in general will influence his or her motivation to learn the language, and thus the degree of proficiency attained.

Students' attitudes towards second language learning can be explained by Spolsky's framework (Brown, 2000). Figure 1 illustrates Spolsky's model.

Based on this framework, attitudes are formed and affected by the social context such as an individual's home as well as

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his/her community. Attitudes also, determine the type and amount of learner motivation. Both motivation and personal characteristics influence how an individual makes use of the learning opportunities in formal and informal contexts. The final results are the linguistic proficiency of a learner and also non-linguistic outcomes such as attitudes which might change after the learning process.

Figure 1:Spolsky's framework
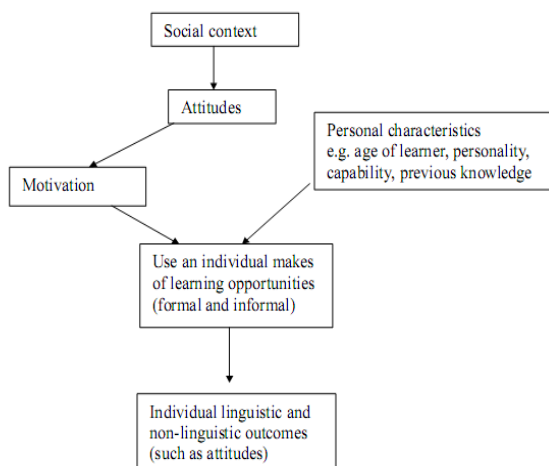
With regard to the significance of roles of attitude and motivation in the success of language acquisition, there are some contentious ideas. According to Masgoret and Gardner (2003), some researchers note that these factors are important, while others felt that these variables are not important, still the other group is on the belief that the relationship reported in the literature were too inconsistent to draw any firm conclusions.

Gardner (1985, as cited in Williams & Burden, 1997) emphasizes that the main factor in the model is motivation. He defines motivation as refereeing to a combination of effort plus desire to arrive at the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes towards learning the language. Other factors such as attitudes towards the learning situation and integrativeness influence these characteristics. Motivation is operationally defined by Gardner in a slightly different way for the purpose of measurement, as composed of desire to learn the language, motivational intensity and attitudes towards learning language. These attributes are measure by the Attitude Motivation Test Battery or AMTAB that consists of a series of self-report questionnaires including a set of questions to measure nineteen different subscales, which represent different aspects of motivation. Gardner emphasizes that there is not one attitude motivation test battery, but that the items should be developed so that they are suitable to the particular situation under investigation. Ellis (1994) provides an explanation of what is meant by integrative motivation. He cites Garnder and McIntyre study in which six variables were included in the measure of integrity motivation: attitude towards French Canadians, interest in foreign languages, integrative orientations, attitude towards the learning situation, desire to learn French and attitude towards learning French.

Johnson and Johnson (1999) state that attitudinal information has a place in language teaching, but it tends to be restricted to two areas: a) preparing the students to learn which may involve both the discovery of the students own underlying attitudes and a process of attitude change and, b) preferences for particular kinds of learning activities and the resulting potential for conflict between teachers and students.

Considerable interest has been shown in attitudes to teaching styles across cultures. McLennan (1987, cited in Johnson & Johnson, 1999, p. 17) used a questionnaire to investigate her Hong Kong students' reactions to features of teaching methodology. What they thought made a good teacher. To some extent, the attitude they manifested could be seen as attitudes towards an important notion of good teaching, and they compared interestingly with attitude displayed by Chinese students in the People's Republic. For example, the mainland students tended to consider a good teacher to be one who was good at the language whereas in Hong Kong, they rated being trained to teach more highly.

Schumann's acculturation model of language learning highlighted the effect of group attitudes. Some of his components of social and psychological distance can be seen as attitudinal concepts. Schumann mentioned ten components: a) social, cultural, economic dominance as between L1 and L2 group, b) integration pattern of either group, c) cultural congruence of the two groups, d) cohesion of either group, e) size of learning group, f) enclosure of learning group, g)psychological language shock, h) culture shock, i) ego permeability, j) orientation.

Regarding the role of attitude information in language course design, Johnson and Johnson (1999) note that it is important to consider how many aspects of language learning aggregated under the term attitude can be recognized in instructional materials, course design, teacher training, etc. Dubin and Olshtain (1986, as cited in Johnson & Johnson, 1999, p. 18) proposed that an important part of the preparation for writing a new course has to be the gathering of data on group and individual attitude prevalent within the group of people who are going to be using the materials along with qualitative and quantitative data about social needs and demographic facts. They are writing particularly on the contexts of preparing courses for learning languages of wider communication where a language, usually English, is required as a means of establishing access to knowledge, markets, influence, aid, etc., but the same principle must also be true of preparing courses for learning minority languages. In general, there are three means of incorporating attitudinal information: a) writing attractive materials, b) allowing several ways of reaching the same goal, c) learner training.

Writing attractive materials means discovering what the learners respond positively to, and incorporating that in the materials. There are difficulties with an extreme learner-centered approach. Since the attractiveness of the materials must be strong enough to outweigh any threat to the learners' self-esteem from the challenge of linguistic difficulties rather than escaping them.

Allowing several ways of reaching the same goals means accounting for possible conflicts between individual students attitudes' and learning group attitudes and also between teacher and students' attitudes. Examples of such conflicts are the realization of the necessity of the language of wider communication against negative feelings towards it from colonial history or even war, and the kind of mismatch between attitudes to learning within a community and attitudes incluDornyei(1994) notes that the main emphasis of Gardner's motivation model has been on general motivational components grounded in the "social milieu rather than in the foreign language classroom." He contends that instrumental motivation may be more important for foreign language learning because students have limited or no experience with the target community and as a result are 'uncommitted to integrating with that group.' Furthermore he asserts that foreign language learners have a different kind of integrative motivation which is

more culture-general than culture-specific. Dornyei(1990) studied adult EFL learners in Hungary. Dornyei describes Hungary as a "unicultural society" where "person-to-person contact with native Anglophones is minimal and English is seen as an ordinary school subject." The learners in his study had voluntarily registered and paid for English courses. He found that instrumental goals did indeed play a prominent role in the learning of English, but only up to the intermediate level. In fact those learners whose interest in learning included socio cultural and nonprofessional reasons demonstrated the highest degree of desired proficiency-that is they wanted to master English rather than acquire a minimal working knowledge of it These learners expressed a desire to spend an extended period of time abroad, so intended contact rather than actual contact was the main factor in their integrative motivation. Even in an EFL context Dornyei found that student motivation was socially grounded though in a different way.

Chihara&Oller(1978) carried out a study of similar type learners to those of Dornyei-an adult EFL setting-in the YMCA in Osaka, Japan.They found a weak relationship between attitudes to the L2 culture and proficiency which contrasted with a study by Oller, Hudson & Liu (1977) of Chinese ESL students in the U.S.A. Like Dornyei, they concluded that there were good reasons to suppose that the relationship between attitudes and proficiency might be quite different for learners who are only exposed to the target language in the classroom context. These learners expressed a wish to visit another country as the most important reason out of seven factors for learning English, corresponding to Dornyei's "intended contact", whereas 'to pass exams' and "to get a better paying job" were ranked among the least important. This is not surprising given the Japanese context where the majority of workers do not change jobs, staying with the same company for life(though this is changing somewhat in recent times) and where passing exams is mainly a matter of form once you have managed to get a place at a university. It is not surprising that these instrumental factors were not taken up by the learners. However if other factors such as "understanding English movies" had been included in the survey, the results might have been different. The reason which was rated least in importance for learning English was "to have English speaking friends", which again points to the main difference between EFL and ESL settings, which is the lack of such opportunities for foreign learners engaged in an imported methodology.

Learners training usually encompasses two kinds of processes. One, helping learners become aware of their own beliefs and attitudes to the language, learning, the L2 communities, classroom activities, individual work, etc., which is itself based on agreed-upon belief that being aware of one's personal ways of perceiving and processing input is the first step towards becoming an independent learner. Two, ways of inducing attitude change, which might refer to easing people out of culture shock by explanation and confidence inducing activities.On the other hand, convincing people that particular learning activities which are negatively rated are in fact both painless and beneficial and even fun (Johnson & Johnson, 1999).

In addition, Wenden (1991, as cited in Karhan, 2007) sees attitudes as including three components: First, attitude estend to have a cognitive component. This could involve beliefs or perceptions aboutthe objects or situations related to the attitude. Second, attitudes have an evaluative component. This means that the objects or situations related to the attitude may generate like or dislike. Third, attitudes have a behavioral component, i.e.

certainattitudes tend to prompt learners to adopt particular learning behaviors.

Research question and the related null hypothesis

- Is there any relationship between attitude and success in language learning of Iranian upper intermediate EFL learners?

- There is no significant relationship between attitude and success in language learning of Iranian upper intermediate EFL learners.

Methodology
Participants

The participants of the study consisted of 32 female language learners from Shokoh-e-Andisheh language institute in Babolsar. The age range of the students was from 13 to 17. It was tried to have the participants from adjacent levels of proficiency from upper intermediate level.

Instruments

The instruments used to gather data for this study was an attitude questionnaire consisting of six constructs entailing 35 questions. In order to prevent comprehension problems from affecting the students' answers to the items on the questionnaire, it was translated into Persian language, which is the native language of the participants.

Procedure and Data analysis

As the questionnaire was in English language, and the subjects' mother tongue, Farsi. The questionnaire was translated into Farsi for the purpose of preventing participants from misunderstanding it. The translated questionnaire was given to two English professors to do the back-translation process. Subjects were randomly selected from 9 classes of upper intermediate levels in Shokouh-e-Andisheh in Babolsar. In order to set the criteria for assigning subjects to the proficient and non-proficient groups, their scores on previous term achievement exams were chosen. Then the questionnaire was distributed among learners and collected. Nearly all the participants answered to the questionnaire and returned it. And also the respondent were informed that the information be kept confidential and be used just for research purpose.

Results and discussions

Table 1. Correlation between language attitude and language learning success

			Attitude	Proficiency
Spearman's rho	Attitude	Correlation Coefficient	1.000	.469(**)
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.007
		N	32	32
	Proficiency	Correlation Coefficient	.469(**)	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.007	.
		N	32	32

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As the results show, the correlation coefficient is 0.469. This is to prove that there is a significant relationship between language attitude and success in language learning of upper intermediate Iranian EFL learners. It means that students who had positive attitude towards English language learning outperformed those who developed negative attitude towards it.

It is observed that students' attitudes towards the target language, its speakers and the learning context mayall play some part in explaining their success in learning a language. According to Hatch and Lazareton (1991), if the correlation coefficient of spearman correlation formula is above .40, it can be claimed that there is a significant relationship between the two variables under investigation.

Conclusion

The findings of the study present a picture establishing significant relationship between attitude and success in English language learning. According to the results shown in the tables, significant differences were observed between successful and unsuccessful students concerning one of the most important orientations of motivation, that is attitude. It means that students with higher level of attitude towards learning English as a foreign language were more successful than those who were not interested in learning English thanks to developing a negative attitude toward the language. Since the teacher can be aware of the attitudes of learners towards the English language, he/she can manage his/her class in a way that paves the way for improving the attitude of the learners towards English, and consequently boost their learning process, which happens to be the utmost important goal of language teaching profession.

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